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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the negative consequences that have occurred in school districts attempting to comply with state legislation in regard to competency testing. It analyzes four definitions of competency assessments for elementary schools and then lists several possible results of a hasty response to competency testing mandates. The paper concludes that competency based education is a movement that may provide many worthwhile outcomes if sufficient time and resources are devoted to developing definitions that are commonly understood and valued by educators and society. In addition, the paper says, it is essential that such definitions are carefully articulated with the goals of education. (Author/LD)

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Implications of Competency Testing For Curriculum and Instruction

J. Richard Harsh

Two issues have emerged on the tip of the iceberg of concerns that professional educators have for the competency testing movement. One issue is exemplified by the comment, "Another test! Testing, testing, testing, - when are we going to have time to teach?" The second issue is reflected by the comment, "They just test those selected basics and don't care or pay any attention to our curriculum and what we must include in our daily instruction." The first issue expresses concern for the frequency and amount of testing. The second concern is for the limited or selected content that is measured and reported as evidence of the product or outcome of the educational program. While both issues represent intrusions into instructional practice, I believe that the second issue may have the most pervasive influence on the nature and outcomes of our educational programs.

At the last count, 37 states had passed legislation requiring competency testing at various times during the kindergarten - 12th grade years of public education. Some states have adopted a single measure and standard for all schools and students while other states have mandated that each school district shall identify minimum or essential competencies and develop or obtain assessments and standards for the measurement of the competencies. The various legislative mandates might appear to imply different consequences for the local district, but there are some common results that should stimulate all of us to continuously analyze and monitor both the intended and unintended outcomes. This analysis and interpretation of the competency testing movement is not based upon speculation of "what might happen." My comments stem directly from the actions and events that have occured in districts attempting to comply with the legislation during the past several years.

These initial years of implementing the competency testing legislative mandates have demonstrated that educators are beset with a series of definitional problems. Since legislation is intentionally vague to gain political

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support, the legislative mandates tend to spawn a wide variety of interpretations and definitions. The wording of the requirements are perceived differently by the educators, parents, general public or various employers and post-secondary institutions. Moreover, the educators and various publics often have diverse expectancies of what will/should result from competency testing and the concomitant instructional interventions.

Consider the following discussion at a board meeting of a unified school district -

Local Employer - "I wish to inform the board of education and the school staff that your competency testing is a farce. You have deceived the community by your reports that all students receiving diplomas have passed the minimum competencies in reading, math and writing. Several of us have employed graduates of your schools and have been shocked by the total inability to read and follow directions, add a column of numbers on an invoice, make change or write well enough to fill out the daily report on items received and delivered. We are here to demand that you carry out the intent and requirements of the legislation."

School Administrator - "The president of the board of education has asked me to respond to your accusations. First let me assure you that we in this school district have complied with every requirement of the competency testing legislation. An advisory committee composed of members of the community and educators defined and recommended the competencies that would be required and measured and the Board of Education subsequently adopted the contents and procedures. All students have been tested. Those that did not pass the exams were given special instruction until they were able to satisfy the competency standards. I can assure you that all graduates have passed the basic skills minimum competencies test at some time during their time in the schools."

Without presenting the long discussion that followed, it should be apparent that there were diverse definitions of minimum competency in the basic skills and a variety of expectancies of what passing the competency tests would imply for further education, employment or out-of-school participation in the community.

This illustration concerned high school graduation competencies but similar definitional problems exist with the competency assessments in the elementary and junior high schools. The spectrum of definitions and expectancies for elementary schools include the following:

1. Basic skill assessment will be limited to those essential skills that will be subsequently required by the high school graduation requirements.
2. Basic skill assessment will be designed to measure the knowledge and skills that students have received instruction in the preceding year.
3. Basic skill assessment will be designed to measure the competencies required for promotion to the next grade or level of instruction.
4. Basic skill assessment will be designed to determine the progress individual students have made in mastering the sequential objectives in the local curriculum continuums of reading, mathematics and writing.

These four definitions suggest different contents for the assessments, different implications for instructional planning and different implications for the practices of grading reporting and promotion. The first definition suggests that the elementary schools will stress the skills and out-of-school applications that have been determined by the high school as "survival literacies." In one instance the assessments used in the elementary schools used the content and applications of the secondary assessments but reduced the complexity and difficulty of the performance required by the test items. As attention was given to the test items, the elementary staff concluded that new contents and instructional activities were required to prepare the

students for the tests. Instructional materials were developed that gave students instruction and practice with the application of the basic skill. in the content and format of the competency assessment. The curriculum and instructional priorities were changed to match the competency assessment.

The second definition was adopted by a district to ensure that the measurement of the student progress and proficiency would be confined to the knowledges, skills and applications that were experienced by the students in the preceding period of instruction. A locally-constructed objective-referenced test was constructed to assess the progress of students at the end of each year of instruction. Variation in curriculum and instructional emphasis among schools in the district was accommodated by allowing separate objective-referenced measures in each school. This program design has been heartily endorsed by the faculties of the several schools as a fair and realistic method of measuring student progress and describing the development of basic skill competency. On the other hand, after two years of implementation, the district, the administration and board of education are concerned with reports that; 1) students from the several schools show different proficiency in coping with the expectancies of the teachers they have when they transfer into the junior high school, 2) parents raise questions about the different requirements in the various schools and assume that the programs are not equivalent and do not offer common instruction for students, 3) the high results on the school objective-referenced tests do not match the low-average performance shown on the state assessment or tne norm-referenced standardized tests.

The third definition emphasizes a procedure to be used in determining which students will be promoted and also develops expectancies for the achievement of all pupils at each grade or age. Implementation of this definition resulted in the development of "grade standards" of the competencies that were to be mastered prior to admission in the succeeding grade. A single competency test for each grade was developed to measure the skills included on the reading, mathematics and writing continuums. Initial results with

the first assessments revealed that one-fourth to one-third of the students did not demonstrate the competencies required for promotion. This condition has caused widespread concern among students, parents, teachers, administration and the board of education. The persons committed to rigorous standards for "back-to-the basics" voice their pleasure that there will be no more "social promotions" and the instructional program will have to improve student's achievement. Other persons in both the community and educational staff express concern for the mass retention of students, the lack of concern for individual differences in rate of learning and the arbitrary standards. The district administration and board of education are concerned with the increased costs associated with providing one, two or three years' instruction for a substantial number of students. A more moderate group suggests that the initial standards were perhaps too rigorous and that the situation can be improved by revising the required competencies and the level of performance that is required for promotion.

The fourth definition was developed to ensure that the elementary curriculum continuums that had been developed in the past three years were implemented and used for the instructional planning for individual students. Assessments were developed to identify the mastery of skills in the continuums and a reporting to students and parents was developed to indicate the level of development and the next stage of instruction that was planned. Instructional contents and activities for the continuums are continuously developed and revised based upon the student's needs identified through the assessments and teacher observations of the student's progress. The competency assessments are used to monitor student progress and assist in developing individualized educational programs for students with wide differences in entry characteristics and progress in the academic program. This district has always used standardized survey achievement tests as well as the mandated state testing program. Annual analysis of the local competency assessments will be related to the student's performance on the state tests and the survey achievement tests to determine the congruence of the several measures. It is anticipated that if high congruence is established between these several measures, the use of the standardized measures

will be reduced to only occasional administrations to provide external bench marks of student attainment. Of additional importance to this district definition of elementary proficiency assessment was the desire to conceive the elementary program as one which was designed to develop the academic enablers for subsequent progress in education and functional proficiency in many contexts and applications. This unified district had previously adopted competencies required for graduation that placed heavy emphasis on the application of basic skills in out-of-school contexts. The elementary advisory committee was in agreement that the high school competency test should not restrict or define the content and priorities of the elementary program.

These four illustrations do not represent the full range of definitions and procedures that are being employed, but they indicate the diversity of concepts, curricular contents and anticipated outcomes that are emerging from the legislative mandates for competency testing. As stated at the outset, the competency testing movement has created concern for the frequency and amount of testing that is required as well as the concern for congruence of what is being measured with what is planned and being taught in a comprehensive curriculum. Hasty response to competency testing mandates may contribute to:

1. Excessive increases in the amount of testing
2. Use of instruments that have a poor match with the local curriculum and instructional process
3. Revision of the curriculum content to match and emphasize only those knowledges, skills and applications that are included in the competency measures
4. Unplanned changes in the grading, reporting and promotion procedure and policies
5. Diverse expectancies among educators and the community regarding the proficiencies that will be mastered and available for use by students at any time during the school years or out-of-school endeavors.

6. The expectancy that the definition and measurement of basic skills will provide a parsimonious impetus for more effective instruction and the elimination of the differences among students in motivation, rates of learning and academic achievement.

7. And an untold number of unanticipated effects on the governance, process and outcomes of education

The competency-based education movement has identified many issues that are worthy of serious consideration for the improvement of the processes and outcomes of education. The need is for careful consideration for how tenets of C.B.E. may be articulated with the comprehensive goals and outcomes expected from education. Certainly, careful consideration of this movement will reveal the importance of clear understanding among educators and the public of the definitional issues that must be identified and resolved.

At different decades of this century, society has changed educational goals and priorities. Recall the progressive education of the 1930's, followed by the special adaptations required by World War II, followed by a plea for humanism in the post-war period, followed by the shock waves created by the launching of Sputnik, followed by the student movement for freedom in the early 60's, etc. While each of these periods may be characterized by the priorities that were suggested for education, there were always those who made pleas for the broad goals and multiple expectations that society has continually held or made education responsible for achieving. At present there is a nation-wide clamor for emphasis upon the basic skills, but because of the definitional problems there appears to be uncertainty and confusion as to what will be the planned or unplanned revisions to the curriculum and the process of instruction.

The competency testing legislation is a new form of societal concern for educational accountability and is also tied to the desire to have competency

(rather than time) based programs of instruction. Educational accountability was a common phrase with many mechanistic solution strategies during the late 60's and early 1970's. During that period, accountability was directed toward the established curriculum. In contrast, the current pressures are heavily directed toward providing assurance that minimum competencies will be achieved by all students. This new emphasis on minimum competencies has been responsible for new definitional problems since the minimums commonly refer to reading, writing and mathematics and seldom make any mention of the other areas of the curriculum such as social studies, science, fine arts, practical arts, health, etc.

As local educational agencies have attempted to respond to the mandates for minimal competency, very few have designed an articulation of competency development with the established goals and outcomes expected from education. The definitional confusion is confounded further by the multiple expectations that communities typically have for the schools. The community (or society in general) frequently expects the schools to provide:

- Social Control - a caretaker program for students
- Community Identity - events and achievements demonstrated by athletic events, bands, fine art awards
- Talent Enhancement - programs to develop music, art, baking, science or the gifted
- Labor market preparation - entry skills for employment or further education

In effect, society expects the schools to develop social responsibility, social integration, personal development in manners or morals or clean living, etc. - but there are only tangential curriculums and vague notions of the time and procedures that will be devoted to such attainment. And now mandates describe specific skill development in reading, mathematics and writing.

The effect of such multiple demands and expectancies is the reorganization of the use of time and reorganization of the priorities or emphasis that will be given to the comprehensive curriculum. Educators are aware of just so many minutes in a school day and as priority is given to a particular content or outcome, other contents and activities are reduced to accommodate the new demand.

At the outset of this discussion it was contended that the most serious and pervasive influence of the minimum competency testing movement was the hasty reorganization of content and emphasis given to the various areas of the curriculum. Some local educational agencies have made such hasty reorganizations and after one year of implementation are experiencing the first wave of reaction. Students exhibit disinterest and hostility for what is called repetitious drill. Grades based only upon a single competency standard have resulted in lowered student motivation and parental hostility (the schools are to blame). Teachers often feel that what is being tested is dictating what must be taught with a resultant loss in the variety of contents of the comprehensive curriculum designed to meet the broad goals of education.

A further consequence of the hasty efforts to employ minimum competency testing is the restricted concept or definition of the domains of reading, language and mathematics. For example, just consider the goal - "to become proficient in understanding and using the English language." Most would agree that such a goal would refer to both receptive and productive skills such as:

Oral language
1. developing listening skills for the comprehension of media presentations, everyday oral communication or formal presentations
2. developing the proficiency to produce language to adequately communicate with various audiences, with various purposes and contents

Written language - 1. developing the ability to read a variety of contents and contexts with comprehension
2. developing the ability to produce written communication with appropriate structures, content and organization

Such language proficiency relates to a very wide array of content and application. For example, the content and use of language with math, social studies, science, health, literature or everyday life experience includes very large domains of vocabulary, applications and skill development. In sharp contrast, most local agencies have restricted the content of the minimal competency testing to very small samples of word attack skills and specific vocabulary or applications for evidence of comprehension. Since the visible evidence of student competency reported to parents or summarized by the press will be the student's performance on the competency tests, there will be powerful pressures and motivations to give instructional emphasis to the test contents. Given the limitations of available instructional time, there is little likelihood that systematic attention can/will be given to more comprehensive goals for the acquisition of language and mathematics.

Learning, if understood and internalized by the learner, takes time. Bloom has argued and illustrated the fact that all learners do not attain nor internalize knowledges and skills within identical time frames. On the other hand, individuals may be trained to respond to a limited set of contents in a consistent manner in a more limited time. If you agree with the proposition that education is concerned with the large domains of knowledge and skills that become enablers for subsequent use in a variety of contexts, then it is clear that training programs differ markedly from education.

Some of the current hasty reaction to minimum competency testing has created concentrated drill on limited contents with testing immediately

following the instructional activity. Tests are given several times during the semester or may be given repetitiously following each period of instruction (and limited to the content of the preceding instruction). There is little wonder that some teachers exclaim, "testing, testing, testing, - when can we teach?" Moreover, there is ample evidence to explain why other teachers view the limited contents of the tests with annoyance and apprehension. Underlying use and understanding of language or mathematics is a complex matrix of thought that cannot be attained solely from a process of memorizing identities such as lists of words, definitions or algorithms. Restrictions in the curricular domains suggest a movement toward training programs and a departure from education as a comprehensive curriculum.

This lengthy description of the concerns created by the hasty efforts to comply with legislative mandates should not be perceived as a blanket condemnation of competency-based education. CBE is a movement that may provide many worthwhile outcomes if sufficient time and resources are devoted to developing definitions that are commonly understood and valued by educators and society. In addition, it is essential that such definitions are carefully articulated with the comprehensive goals of education. Thus we may have agreement with the purpose but lament the procedures that bring negative or unintended consequences. This is epitomized by the venerable Japanese quotation, "I agree with the overall principle, but disagree on every specific point."

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